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HOW WE SHOULD BE CONVERTED

A reflection by St. Bernard

“Turn to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, and rend your hearts and not your garments, say the Lord.” The Lord is calling us to a spiritual turning that is accomplished only in the whole of one’s lifetime. Begin by looking carefully at the objects of your love, your fear and the reasons for your joy or sadness. Perhaps you will find a worldly mind hiding under cover of a professed religion. If that is so then you need to turn your love so that you love nothing except the Lord or because of the Lord. But you must also turn your fear so that you dread nothing except offending the Lord or those the Lord loves. Likewise, let both your joy and your sadness be turned to the Lord. What could be more perverse than to rejoice in evil? But if you grieve for your sin or your neighbor’s you do well. We rejoice in loving Christ with our brethren, rejoicing in their spiritual success and grieve with them in their spiritual adversities.

Notice that the prophet calls us to fasting. This is a physical turning to the Lord and it is no small help to the spiritual one. But this means not only eating less or drinking less but abstaining from all merely fleshly excesses in longings and desires. We must keep it in mind that there is a bread from which one should not abstain. I am thinking not only of the bread of the altar but of the “bread of tears”. One who doesn’t yet mourn the old ways doesn’t yet mourn sin and time lost, and doesn’t yet know how to rejoice in the new because it isn’t seen in contrast to the old. Only longing for our God with all our heart brings that joy.

Remember too that the prophet called upon us to read our hearts even more than our worldly garments. Is your heart divided in a good sense? Do you love all the things the Lord asks you to do? The Spirit of God is manifold and you can’t follow the many ways in which he would have you walk in his service and that of others unless you allow your heart to be rent. David says in a psalm, ***“My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready!”*** Be ready for both adversity and prosperity, ready for what is low and what is high, ready for whatever *the* Spirit commands. If the Lord wants you to be a shepherd let your heart be ready.

If you are afraid then meditation on the Law of the Lord and you will know whence you are to lead. We need to rend our hearts so that we may be whole, as was our Savior’s tunic. We need to receive from the Lord many virtues and make these like a garment. This is a many-colored garment bound on by the belt of love. In this way we acquire the many-colored beauty of a Godly way of life. From this comes perseverance in the life of virtue. It is a beautiful way of living. Whatever call you have received to serve others and help them find the path to God it will give you many reasons to meditate on the Lord’s gifts and love, and so to give thanks. This is the way that leads to conversion. If it requires an entire lifetime it is also a lifetime of much joy. Rejoice in the Lord always.

GIVING YOURSELF TO THE LORD'S SERVICE

A reflection by the Carthusian Father John Justus Landsberg

Everything the Lord Jesus decided to do, and everything he caused to endure, was ordained by him for our instruction, correction and advantage. He knew that what we would learn, and the consolation that would come to us through his words and deeds were in no way negligible. He wanted no opportunity to slip by that might enable him to help us. He was thinking always of you and me.

This is the case of the opportunity offered him when he was led into the wilderness. Indeed, his guide was the Holy Spirit and it was the Spirit's intention that he should go to a place where he would be tempted. It was a place where the devil would have a chance to put him to the test, and one that the devil couldn't pass up. Circumstances seemed to be all in the devil's favor. Here was Jesus alone, at prayer, physically worn down by fasting and abstinence. Was the man indeed the Christ? Was he or was he not really the Son of God? But Jesus accepted this for us.

From this episode we draw the lesson that human life on earth is warfare. The first thing we Christians must expect is to be tempted by the devil. Scripture itself tells us this in many ways. It is written (e.g.) "*when you enter God's service, prepare yourself for an ordeal*". We Christians, but especially the newly baptized, find wonderful comfort in the example of Jesus. Israel had been tempted in the wilderness after it was freed from Egypt, and with almost the same temptation that faced Jesus. Israel failed but Jesus won the victory! We can win it with him!

Christ was tested immediately after his baptism. He deliberately turned wholly to God and now he was tested to see if he would do just that no matter what happened to him. Many of us seem to experience keener temptations after our conversion than we did before. We are, for instance, often challenged for our faith or even persecuted in a way that didn't happen before. We have Jesus' example to show us our path.

Of course, this is not the only lesson. Seeing how difficult it was for Jesus to keep turning to God we should not lightly expose ourselves to temptations, when that isn't necessary. We learn that we must be sensitive to the leadings of the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit calls us to a place of temptation we know that we, with Jesus, have the grace to overcome. We see a lesson about our own frailty and weakness. So we receive a lesson about always being on watch. Now we know what it means to wait always for the Lord's coming. We need him so much! So we don't place ourselves into temptation but seek always to be mindful of the Lord's watchful concern for us. We know that we too have been given the gift of the Spirit and been chosen as God's beloved children. We have a Heavenly Father we can always turn to. We have a brother in our Lord Jesus. We have the Spirit and we have brothers and sisters in faith. Watch, pray, fast, and keep your eyes fixed on Jesus—always.

THE MEANING OF THE GREAT FAST

A reflection by Bishop Kallistos Ware

It is important not to overlook the physical requirements of fasting. It is even more important not to overlook its inward significance. Fasting isn't a mere matter of diet. It is moral as well as physical. True fasting is a conversion of heart and will. It is a return to God; it is a coming home like that of the Prodigal to our Heavenly Father's home.

In the words of St. John Chrysostom, it means abstinence not only from food but from sin. The fast, he insists, should be kept not only by the mouth but by the eyes, the ears, the feet, the hands and all the other members of the body. It is useless to fast from food, says St. Basil, while indulging in cruel criticisms or slander of others. "You don't eat meat, but you devour your brother or sister", as his words.

The inner significance of fasting is summed up in the triad: prayer, fasting, almsgiving. Divorced from prayer and reception of the sacraments, unaccompanied by acts of compassion, our fasting becomes hypocritical, even demonic. It doesn't lead to contrition and joyfulness but to pride and irritability. Fasting is valueless or harmful if not combined with prayer. In the Gospels the devil is cast out by "prayer and fasting". These should be accompanied by love for others expressed in practical ways—that's what almsgiving is. It requires works of compassion and forgiveness. Without love toward others there can be no genuine fast. This love should not be limited to formal gestures or sentiments. We have to give our time and what we are and not just things.

The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence on God. If practiced seriously, the Lenten abstinence from food—particularly in the opening days—involves a considerable measure of real hunger, and also a feeling of tiredness and physical exhaustion. The purpose of this is to lead us in turn to a sense of inward brokenness and contrition: to bring us to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement, "Without me you can do nothing!" (Jn.15:5) If we always take our fill of food and drink we easily grow over-confident in our own abilities, acquiring a false sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The observance of a physical fast undermines this sinful complacency. Lenten abstinence gives us the saving self-dissatisfaction of the Publican, making us poor in spirit.

Yet it would be misleading to speak only of this element. Abstinence leads also to a sense of lightness, wakefulness, freedom and joy. We find that it enables us to sleep less, to think more clearly, and to work more decisively. Fasting doesn't seek to do violence to our body but rather to restore it to health and equilibrium. Fasting liberates our body from the burden of excessive weight and makes it a willing partner in the task of prayer, alert and responsive to the voice of the Spirit.

THE TESTING OF GOD'S CHILDREN

A reflection by James Mackey & Daniel Harrington

Matthew, Mark and Luke place the story of Jesus temptation at the very beginning of his mission. This enabled the author of Hebrews to describe Jesus as one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. The story is not intended to picture something that happened to Jesus alone but as a trial that is always waiting to surface in our consciousness, as it regularly does. We see this later in the Gospels. For instance, Jesus was tempted as a member of the Jewish People to see God as “our” God and so reject a non-Jew who approached him and was then saved by her faith. In the Garden Jesus was tempted to refuse the bitter chalice of cruel execution that fidelity to the reign of the Creator God required him to drink to the last dregs.

Jesus’ closest disciples, and those who would be leaders in the community of his followers, were not simply tested but actually fell on important occasions. Peter, who at one moment was praised for recognizing Jesus as the true Messiah and Son of God, was certified as giving in to Satan by Jesus at the very moment of refusing to contemplate the necessity of the cross for the new life and witness of Jesus’ followers. They, as Israel in the wilderness, failed; Jesus passed.

Matthew’s version of the story consists of three dialogues between Jesus and the devil. Each has the devil offering a test and Jesus responding with a quote from Deuteronomy (chapters 6-8). In those chapters Moses addresses the people near the end of their wanderings in the wilderness and before they enter the Promised Land. “You shall remember all the ways which the Lord, your God, has led you that he might humble you, testing you to show what was in your heart, and see whether you would keep his commands or not”. (8:2) The themes are those of being led, of fasting, of the symbolism of the number 40, and of God’s never flagging care.

God may test Israel but Israel may not put God to the test. That is one of the things that Israel did in the wilderness. Moses is presented as challenging Israel, and us, to learn from past mistakes. The challenge is to act faithfully, now that they are entering the Promised Land. That is our challenge too. We are at the beginning of the reign of God, as Jesus says. It is Jesus who shows us how to pass every test by finding in it an opportunity to turn to God and entrust one’s self and life to God, and then stick to that decision. Jesus, in short, is the model of covenant fidelity. This is the test we must all pass, whether it comes from the devil or from those around us, or from the secret places in our hearts. Lent is a time for living fidelity. How many times each day are we tempted not to live it? Each test is an opportunity. Grace is promised and given. We can pass the test,

LEADING ALL TO UNITY IN CHRIST

A reflection developed from a sermon by Bishop Jacques Bossuet

Jesus Christ is the corner stone of the Church of God. In the beginning of his ministry he called disciples and told them they would learn from him how to catch people. His ministry and mission was to draw all people to himself in a way that would draw them to the Heavenly Father. In order to do this more effectively he then chose from among all his disciples twelve. Then from those twelve he chose one, Peter. The name Peter means “rock” and it was the faith Peter received as a gift from God that made him a rock upon which the Church might be built. Jesus Christ and belief in Jesus Christ is the rock on which the community of God’s People is built. The mission of the Church is to draw all to this rock. But it cannot do this unless it is itself one in Christ. The mission of Peter is to lead all those who believe in Christ to this unity. That is the commission the Risen Christ gave to Peter when he appeared to his disciples at the Lake of Galilee. Peter was to feed all who would belong to Christ and that office was to continue all long as this world lasts.

Thus St. Peter appears first. He is the first to confess the faith. He is the first to receive the obligation to exercise love of all Christ’s flock. He is the first of all the apostles who saw Jesus Christ as risen to witness to this before all the people. He is the first named when all the apostles are named in the Gospels. He was the first to confirm the faith by a miracle. He was the first to convert Jews and the first to receive Gentiles into the community of believers.

But notice that the words spoken to him: “Whatsoever you shall bind shall be bound; whatsoever you shall loose shall be loosed.” were thereafter also spoken to all the apostles. The force of the ministry of the apostles and their successors consists also in binding and loosing. The One who gives this power to Peter also with his own mouth gave it to all the apostles. This goes with their mission to preach the faith in Christ, and so draw all to Christ and the Heavenly Father.

Indeed, all those who accept faith in Jesus Christ have received a similar commission. “As my Father has sent me, so says Jesus, I send you.” We have all been sent to witness to the gift of faith we have received. That is how the church of Antioch was founded. It was only later that the apostles sent a special envoy to confirm the members of this community in their faith. He it was who summoned St. Paul to come and help. It was only much later that St. Peter came to Antioch and began to preside in the church there, as today’s feast celebrates. And he seemed to be failing in his ministry of drawing all into unity until confronted publicly by St. Paul. You see that we must all support each other in this ministry of drawing all into unity in Christ. On all Christ breathes a kind of equality. On all he diffuses the same Spirit: “Receive the Holy Spirit”. And from this all follows. None of this reverses Christ’s choice of St. Peter, or of the Twelve Apostles. Each of us has a place and a mission. It is a mission of unity.

ATTAINING TO THE BLESSING GIVEN IN CHRIST

A reflection from a commentary on the Psalms by St. Hilary of Poitiers

“Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways.” Notice that when Scripture speaks of the fear of the Lord it never leaves this phrase in isolation. It is clear that this alone cannot perfect our faith and bring us its entire blessing. No, many things are presupposed and they show the meaning of this saying. Proverbs tells us this in saying: “If you cry out for wisdom and raise your voice for understanding, if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord”.

Here we see how many steps we must take before we attain fear of the Lord. We must begin by crying out for wisdom. We must hand over to our intellect the duty of making decisions. We must look for wisdom and search for it. Only then shall we understand what the fear of the Lord is, and how far it differs from what is ordinarily meant by fear.

Fear in the ordinary sense is the alarm that fills frail human beings when faced by some suffering from which their whole being recoils. Such fear surges up in us and is brought to the surface by a guilty conscience, or by the claims of someone more powerful than we are, or by the assault of someone stronger, or by sickness or by the danger of an attack by a wild beast or by any like calamity. This kind of fear isn't taught but springs from our natural frailty. Objects of terror like these of themselves strike fear in us of themselves.

On the other hand, of “fear of the Lord” we read: “Come, my children, listen to me and I will teach you the fear of the Lord”. So the fear of the Lord has to be learned. It springs not from our nature but from obedience to God's commandments, from uprightness of life, and from knowledge of the truth. Our fear of God comes entirely from love. Perfect love brings it to perfection. It is our love of God that makes us listen to God's counsels, obey God's laws, and trust in God's promises.

“Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord and follow all God's ways, loving God and keeping God's commandments with your whole heart and soul, so that it may be well with you!” Our Lord is The Way. There are many ways of various goals and we must search out how all these ways of seeking good can lead us to the Lord. There are many teachers. These are found in the Law, the prophets, in the Gospels, in the writings of the apostles, in the many good works we are commanded to perform. If we follow these teachers and never give up we shall come to the fear of the Lord because we shall come to perfect love of our God. And in this we shall possess the blessing that Christ brings for all peoples.

FOLLOWING JESUS INTO THE WILDERNESS

A reflection from a sermon by Bishop Alonso de Orozco

Beloved, I beg you, let us accompany Christ in seeking out the wilderness of repentance as quickly as we can. Let us be ashamed from now on to spend our time seeking pleasure and diversions, especially things like gluttony, because our Savior is engaged in prayer and in fasting. Recall the soldier, Uriah, when King David asked him why he hadn't gone down to his home while in Jerusalem. "The ark of God, he said, dwells in tents and my Lord Joab is in camp fighting against the enemy" and should I indulge in ordinary pleasures? What about us? Shall we apply ourselves to prayer and fasting or to ordinary pleasure seeking?

We know that Christ Jesus, who is the ark of God, and in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge of the Heavenly Father, is in battle with the devil in a kind of wilderness. Shall we take our rest and seek ordinary delights? We need to bravely resist the temptation to do this. We must say: "Not on bread alone does a person live, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God". We surely have to rely on the One who gives food to all who call upon him, and doesn't even forget sparrows and crows when they call out for what they need.

We can perform all our actions for the glory of God. We can do everything in praise of our Creator. We must not tempt God the Most Good. Scripture tells us, "You shall not tempt the Lord, your God". We must remember the word, "Whoever loves danger will perish in it". If we keep these truths in mind we will be able to escape not only ordinary dangers but vainglory in thinking ourselves secure in God's love no matter what we do.

A wicked king of Babylon erected a golden statue and called all to worship it. That is an image of the devil, the master of all who would follow their own will and convenience rather than seek the Lord and fear him. We would adore a monster if we became this sort of person. We have to imitate the courage of the three young men who refused to worship the devil or his many images. As Jesus said to the devil: "The Lord your God shall you adore, and only God shall you serve".

Those three brave young men chose to enter a fiery furnace rather than worship such an image. Do you believe that if you follow them an angel of the Lord will come to you and make that furnace into a place where a moist and gentle breeze of God's goodness blows? The fire won't be able to harm you. Instead you will claim the victory over the enemy and sing with one heart and voice unwearied praise and thanksgiving to Christ our true Lord. He can rescue us from all danger. By his gift of grace, he has cast down the enemy and his pride. He will raise us up to heavenly glory. So let us bravely follow him into our own wilderness and then watch him overcome in us all evil attractions and grow in love of our God and of one another.